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SUBJECT: CODEL DODD MEETS AN EFFUSIVE CHAVEZ

Classified By: A/DCM Abelardo A. Arias for Reason 1.4(d)

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Summary  
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1. (C) Reversing course, on short notice President Hugo Chavez decided to meet with Senators Dodd, Chafee and Nelson and the Ambassador at Miraflores palace on January 10. An effusive and gregarious Chavez explained his commitment to Venezuela's poor and said his land reform plans were only part of that commitment. The Senators probed Chavez on the future of bilateral relations, including the possibility of a visit to the United States. Chavez responded cautiously, saying a visit was unlikely asserting concerns about security. He concluded that he was nonetheless willing to engage, perhaps starting with a meeting between the new U.S. Secretary of State and the Venezuelan Foreign Minister.

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Asked about bilateral cooperation on energy, drugs and terrorism, Chavez said the real problem was poverty. Chavez also asserted that he was not an interventionist but instead cooperated with other countries like Colombia and Bolivia.  
End Summary.

2. (C) With two hours advance notice to the CODEL, President Hugo Chavez changed his mind and agreed to meet with Senators Christopher Dodd (D-CT), Lincoln Chafee (R-RI), William Nelson (D-FL) at Miraflores on January 10. The meeting lasted nearly two hours. Energy Minister Rafael Ramirez, who literally said nothing during the entire meeting, and senior members of the presidential staff, joined Chavez. The Ambassador accompanied the CODEL. There was no press. Chavez was gregarious and effusive throughout, and shifted to a first name basis with Senator Dodd by the conclusion. Senator Dodd spoke in Spanish. Senators Chafee and Nelson spoke through an interpreter. Chavez did most of the talking.

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Bilateral Relationship and Future Cooperation: Maybe  
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3. (C) Senator Dodd suggested it was in the interest of both governments to emphasize areas of positive cooperation, such as energy, drugs and terrorism. What could be the basis for a positive bilateral agenda in the future? Might it include the NGO Sumate? Chavez agreed on the importance of emphasizing the positive. The relationship had been bad in recent years, but he was willing to start anew. He offered a long description of the tremendous gap between rich and poor in Venezuela. This dichotomy, and the unwillingness of the traditional political parties to address it, he said, led to his entry into politics and the creation of the MVR movement. He had an obligation to the poor and would meet his obligation to them at whatever cost. The current land reform efforts were part of that obligation, Chavez said.

4. (C) Senators Dodd and Chafee probed further on the future of the U.S.-Venezuela relationship. Neither the U.S. nor Venezuelan foreign policy was all bad. Was there a basis for progress? Would Chavez consider an early visit to the U.S? If they could make the offer, would he consider meeting with members of the U.S. Congress, perhaps through the Senate Foreign Relations Committee? Chavez responded cautiously on the idea of a U.S. visit. His personal security was the issue, he said. He was not convinced of his security in the U.S., Chavez asserted, particularly in light of the fact that some members of his security detail were not allowed visas for the U.S. (Note: Chavez was presumably referring to the chief of his security team who participated in his 1992 coup attempt and is ineligible for a U.S. visas for that and other reasons.) Chavez said there were Venezuelans in the U.S. who called for his murder on public radio, others who engaged with paramilitary organizations to plan his overthrow, and former Venezuelan military officers who attempted to blow up foreign embassies in Caracas. How would we like it if such individuals, sought by the USG, were allowed to live in Venezuela? There was no doubt in his mind, Chavez said, that some elements of the USG were behind the April 2002 coup

attempt against him. All that said, Chavez asserted that he is still willing to engage in a new bilateral relationship. Perhaps an early meeting between the new Secretary of State and Foreign Minister Ali Rodriguez was the way to start, he suggested.

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Helping on Terrorism, but Poverty is the Issue  
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15. (C) Senator Nelson noted that the Embassy felt we were not getting all the cooperation we could from GOV on terrorism. Was there more we could do on this front? Chavez suggested that the real issue was not terrorism, but the root of all terrorism ) poverty. Until we solved global poverty, we would not solve global terrorism. However, he agreed that all governments had to join in combating terrorism, and Venezuela was cooperating. Chavez told the Senators that given his suspicions of USG involvement in the April 2002 coup attempt, he was very suspicious of cooperating with the CIA. He said he had, however, worked with the Colombian government on terrorism and security cases. He asserted that he is willing to join a political effort to negotiate peace in Colombia, should President Uribe ask him. Chavez said he was cooperating with all Latin American governments in their counter-terrorism efforts.

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Chavez the Anti-American vs. Chavez the Uniter  
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16. (C) Senator Chafee noted that successful U.S. political candidates tried to be uniters, not dividers. Chavez presided over a badly polarized country, Chafee said, and we could understand how he believes an anti-U.S. line helps him in the short term politically, but could he envision a more positive approach to the U.S.? Chavez asserted that he is not anti-American. He wants to unite, not divide, he told the Senators. After the August 15 recall referendum, he said, he refrained from anti-U.S. rhetoric, but the USG did not. He knows that not all the American people agree with U.S. foreign policy. The USG accuses him of intervention in the internal affairs of neighboring countries, but it is not so. He has talked to Evo Morales in Bolivia, but only at President Mesa's request, to convince Morales to back off violent protests on the natural gas issue. He has talked to the FARC and ELN in the past, but only at the invitation of former Colombian President Pastrana. Some have suggested that he supports the Peruvian extremists who rebelled recently against President Toledo, but he has never had any contact with them. However, Chavez told the Senators, he will express his regional views. For example, he said, he believes the USG is wrong on Haiti: There is no long term solution that does not involve Aristide in some way.

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Time to Invite the Peace Corps?  
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17. (C) Senator Dodd suggested that the Peace Corps has served in the past to bring societies together, to educate in both the U.S. and Latin America, and to assist poor communities in essential areas such as health and education. Dodd noted that he, himself, served in the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic. Would Chavez be willing to invite the Peace Corps to Venezuela? Chavez responded elliptically, saying he liked the idea of more people-to-people contact. Perhaps the governments of Latin America should consider a regional effort to fight poverty that would include the Peace Corps, he suggested. Ambassador noted that many Latin American countries already had a Peace Corps presence. Chavez reiterated that he did not dislike the American people. He has friends in the U.S., including a nephew, Antonio, who lives in the U.S. He said he likes Congressman Cass Ballenger, and had enjoyed his contact with the people of Hickory, NC while visiting the congressman. But if the people of Hickory, NC had the same degree of poverty as Venezuela, he claimed, they would have the same social, economic and political problems as well. Calling poverty the core issue, Chavez said he hoped the U.S. would join an effort to cancel the debt of all the world's poorest nations.

18. (U) CODEL Dodd did not have the opportunity to clear this message before its departure.  
McFarland